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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Human Rights Advocates Inc., a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is hereby circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 February 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Planting a Seed: How Knowledge, Education and Cohesive Efforts Can Aid the Environment

I. Introduction

Humanity is pushing the Earth beyond its limits. In 1992, the world's most prominent scientists, known as Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), sent a letter to government leaders around the world.1 This letter urged "people to take immediate action to stop the ever-increasing environmental degradation that threaten[ed] global life support systems on this planet."2 This was the scientists' first warning to humanity. Now, 25 years later, the UCS has issued their second warning.3 Joined by 15,364 signatories from 184 countries, their message is clear: We are destroying the Earth and all its life, our only home.4

The environment has been an important topic to the Human Rights Council (HRC). HRC has long affirmed numerous resolutions recognizing that a sustainable environment contributes to the enjoyment of human rights.5 On the contrary, climate change hinders the enjoyment of a healthy environment while also having direct and indirect negative impact on numerous human rights, such as the right to life and the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.6 This was reaffirmed in 2017.7

It is imperative that the UCS's warning be addressed or recognized. Scientists warn that humans are "pushing Earth's ecosystems beyond their capacities to support the web of life."8 It is vital to recognize human activity as the root of climate change and promote the exchange of knowledge between governments, scientists, human rights defenders, civil society and relevant stakeholders to begin true action on climate change.

II. Current Environmental Impact and Affected Human Rights

The United Nations' (UN) report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is virtually certain that human activity is a cause of climate change.9 Developed nations are found to be the largest historical contributor.10 Human activity includes driving cars, burning fossil fuels, water pollution, dumping hazardous waste, excessive agriculture, deforestation, species extinction, overpopulation, and many more. This raises a resource sustainability problem; while some effects are necessary or inevitable, the rate of adverse impact on environmental resources far surpasses the level at which it should be replenished. If left uncontrolled, UCS warns a mass extinction event will cause "many current life forms [to] be annihilated or at least committed to extinction by the end of this century."11

There are a host of environmental issues affecting the Earth at this moment. UCS lists the following: atmosphere, water resources, oceans, soil, forests, living species, and population.12 Additionally, the UN has further emphasized the importance of biodiversity by stating, "The full enjoyment of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, and water, depends on the services provided by ecosystems."13

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1 Union of Concerned Scientists, *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice*, https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/67/12/1026/4605229.

2 Union of Concerned Scientists, *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity*, https://www.ucsusa.org/about/1992-world-scientists.html#.WmDyTKinEox, at 1.

3 *Supra*, note 1.

4 *Id.* at 1, 3.

5 Human Rights Council Res. 28/11, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/28/11 (Mar. 26, 2015).

6 *Id.* at ¶ 10.

7 Human Rights Council Res. 34/20, ¶ 11, 12 U.N. Doc. A/HRC/RES/34/20 (Mar. 24, 2017).

8 *Id.*

9 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis*, *https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/AR5_SYR_FINAL_SPM.pdf*

10 *Supra*, note 2, at 6.

11 *Supra*, note 1, at 1.

12 *Id.*

13 Special Rapporteur on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations Relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment, Human Rights Obligations Relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean,

There are many misconceptions concerning the environment and climate change. For example, the term "global warming," which is one effect of climate change, has been used as an incorrect interchangeable term for "climate change." While the Earth is getting warmer due to the increased heat trapped in the atmosphere, that is not the only effect; it has caused extreme temperatures where some places are hotter than usual, whereas others are subjected to intense rain and snowstorms.14

A truth that must be recognized is that humans are the leading cause of climate change.15 Opponents have argued that in the past, climate change has occurred in many instances, even before humans created manmade CO_2 emissions.16 However, this falsely presumes humans do not have a responsibility in climate change because it happens naturally.17 UCS's report finds that out of the eight categories of problems cited, humankind has only made one meaningful change: the reduction of ozone depletion.18 The world collectively recognized and addressed the issue by creating the United Nations Montreal Protocol.19 That was the beginning of that change.

While the impact of climate change on the environment is indiscriminate and felt globally, there are countless instances where environmental disasters are suffered most acutely by the poorest and most vulnerable of society.20

III. How Knowledge, Education and Collective Effort Can Aid the Environment

The UCS and the UN have acknowledged education as one of the keys to ending climate change.21 Education is not only limited to the school system, but also extends to educating civil society on relevant human rights issues, including the environment. Facilitating the spread of knowledge not only engages civil society in caring and understanding the environment, it also fosters opinions and discourse needed in climate change decision-making and behaviors. Governments need to become an open, indiscriminate source of reliable information for civil society.

The following are two examples of this.

A. Japan

In a small village in southwestern Japan, there is a town called "Kamikatsu" that is known for being nearly "zero-waste."22 As the name suggests, zero-waste refers to residents striving to adopt a waste-free lifestyle. Townspeople sort, wash, and transport their waste to their town's sorting center, which is then double-checked by staff. The task is not simple as there are 34 separate categories for waste. Although tedious and time-consuming, it is second-nature to the residents since the program was implemented in 2003. About 80% of their waste is recycled, reused, or composted. In addition to their laborious zero-waste program, the town also repurposes old and discarded products, such as teddys bears into kimonos. The program was created by the city and residents' collective desire to prevent a further damaging environment. Kamikatsu hopes to become completely zero-waste by 2020. This green mindset is not limited to just Kamikatsu. According to the 2018 Environmental Performance Index, Japan was ranked first in the Asian region for performance on high-priority environmental issues.23

B. United States of America (USA)

Healthy and Sustainable Environment, ¶ 5 U.N. Doc. A/HRC/34/49 (Jan. 19, 2017).

14 Union of Concerned Scientists, *It's Cold and My Car is Buried in Snow. Is Global Warming Really Happening?*, https://www.ucsusa.org/global-warming/science-and-impacts/science/cold-snow-climate-change.html#.WmerTKinEow.

15 *Supra*, note 9.

16 Center of Climate and Energy Solutions, *Realities vs. Misconceptions about Climate Change Science*, https://c2es.org/site/assets/uploads/2017/03/misconceptions-realities-climate-science-06-2012.pdf.

17 *Supra*, note 1, at 1.

18 *Id.*

19 Union of Concerned Scientists, *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice Supplemental File S1*, *https://goo.gl/yrRm11, at 2.*

20 *Supra*, note 7, at 2.

21 *Supra*, note 1, at 3; Human Rights Council Res. 34/20, ¶ 25, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/RES/34/20 (Mar. 24, 2017).

22 Business Insider, *The simple way this Japanese town has become nearly zero waste*, http://www.businessinsider.com/zero-waste-town-kamikatsu-japan-2017-7.

23 Yale University, *2018 Environmental Performance Index*, https://epi.envirocenter.yale.edu/downloads/epi2018policymakerssummaryv01.pdf.

A nationwide non-profit organization called "Alliance for Climate Education" (ACE) is moving the USA. in a positive step towards climate change education.24 The non-profit conducts climate change education in high schools across the country. The organization provides educators with innovative learnings tools to educate students, such as videos, interactive trivia and lesson plans.25 The program was studied by Yale, George Mason University and Stanford researchers. They found that students who participated in ACE's programs were more informed and involved in climate change issues, and also exhibited short and long-term positive behaviours such as using reusable items.

Education and cohesive effort encourages a knowledgeable and involved society. Without them, civil society cannot meaningfully engage in the conversation about climate change.

IV. Recommendations

Human Rights Advocates (HRA) urges the Council to:

1. Specifically request that the Special Rapporteur examine the cohesive effort towards education, knowledge and the environment by addressing civil society and their perspective.

HRA urges States to:

1. Pay special attention to the UCS's World Scientists' Warning to Humanity and its research regarding human activities' effect on the world and progress that has been made.

2. Educate and involve civil society in the conversation about humanity and the environmental impact, heed attention to civil society's opinions and concerns regarding climate change, ensure their participation in environmental decision-making, and provide accurate and complete information.

3. Enable the exchange of information between global leaders, scientists, human rights defenders and other relevant stakeholders to create a unified framework to tackle climate change and promote cohesive decision-making in reducing negative environmental impact.

24 Flora, Saphir, Lappé, Roser-Renouf, Maibach, Leiserowitz, *Evaluation of a national high school entertainment education program: The Alliance for Climate Change Education*, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10584-014-1274-1.